

# Inscriptions

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**Title:** On translation & love

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**Abstract:** This piece meditates on the possibility that *translation*, which entails openness to the possibility of another, and *love*, which always already involves reading, are not quite the same thing but are potentially inseparable from each other. All while bearing in mind the fact that translation, even when done with love, always also transforms the text: changing it in ways that might fundamentally alter it, for better or worse.

Where the translator is always also potentially a traitor.

Who (s)he betrays though — the text, herself, the other, their relation — might well be the question.

Though, as Neil Murphy once told me, “reading literature with your head is always a mistake”. So, instead of attempting to rationalise a text — reign it in, make it safe, tame it — perhaps all we can do is to open ourselves to a work.

And listen.

Hoping it *takes my breath away*.

**Keywords:** translation; love; literature; philosophy; writing; reading

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# On translation & love

Jeremy Fernando<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This piece meditates on the possibility that *translation*, which entails openness to the possibility of another, and *love*, which always already involves reading, are not quite the same thing but are potentially inseparable from each other. All while bearing in mind the fact that translation, even when done with love, always also transforms the text: changing it in ways that might fundamentally alter it, for better or worse.

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The translator is indeed a strange, nostalgic man: he experiences in his own language, but in the manner of something missing, everything promised him in the way of present affirmations by the original work (the work which remains a more-over — he can’t reach it since he’s not at home, at rest in the language but is an eternal guest who doesn’t live there). That’s why, if we can believe the testimony of specialists, he is always in more

difficulty as he translates with the language to which he belongs than at a loss with the one he doesn’t possess.

(Maurice Blanchot)<sup>2</sup>

A notion that came to me, rather accidentally it must be said, whilst I was reading — if one can ever be said to be reading — a text by another, ostensibly Jacques Derrida, whose signature is on the text, on the cover of the text, who had signed-off on the text, perhaps even un-

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<sup>2</sup>Maurice Blanchot, ‘Traduire’ in *L’Amitié*, as translated by Peggy Kamuf, and read in Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: texts and discussions*, translated by Peggy Kamuf from the French edition edited by Claude Lévesque and Christie McDonald (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988): 155.

dersigned it, continues to underwrite it; and not just any other, for the question of *testimony* which Maurice Blanchot opens here is precisely the one JD reads in MB's beautiful tale, *L'instant de ma mort*.

And here, we should bear in mind that this stunning passage from Maurice Blanchot comes to me through a translation, through the words, thoughts, lines, of Peggy Kamuf — who herself was translating from the original transcripts (that is, if we can ever call a transcription original) by Claude Lévesque and Christie McDonald, who were inscribing a moment in time, a roundtable discussion that was held in Montreal in 1979, and first appeared in the French in 1984 (so a transcription over time), and then in the English<sup>3</sup> a few years later (so also, a transference through time).

Oh yes, and let us bear in mind, in a footnote.

As an aside.

One that begins — beautifully ironically — with a note (on a note) by Peggy Kamuf, a notable notation which opens with: “but can any note take up the slack here, in this situation?” The easy answer surely being *no*, but that would be too easy. For, it is not the role of any note — or translation for that matter — to play the currently-fashionable role of *facilitator*, to make reading (*lit*) easy (*facile*), even as that might make one feel more comfortable, lull one into a state of being at ease.

And, as importantly, the note, the aside, the footnote, as a *supplement* to the text; thus always already both an addition-to, perhaps subtraction-from, and always also part-of and apart-from, at the same time. Where the rela-

tionship between the note — and whomever annotates, notes on, makes a note-of, maybe even notifies us of — the supplementary inscription, and the so-called main-text, manuscript (but who decides which *manus* counts for more), might well be found in the “slack”. Not in the sense of any lack, but perhaps more intriguingly that of a *bounce* — that of a line, whose movement as Kleist tries to never let us forget is also that of the soul.<sup>4</sup>

Where, each time we read — each time we attempt to balance the language to which we so-call belong and the one we don't possess (can one ever possess a language; or are we possessed by it?) — each time we attend to a text, we might well be in the realm of the funambulist. Whose role, even task, as Jean Genet reminds us — through his note written for, his love-letter to, Abdallah — is to “give your metal wire the most beautiful expression, not of you, but of it”.<sup>5</sup> Where, it is never about you, nor the one who has written the text, nor maybe even the text itself, but the relationship between the three.

So, always also a connection to another: quite possibly an opening of oneself to an other. Which does not necessarily mean that the other becomes any clearer, any more known, to us. For, as my dear teacher, Avital Ronell, reminds us, “the connection to the other is a reading — not an interpretation, assimilation, or even a hermeneutic understanding, but a reading”.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, where *reading* might be nothing other than opening ourselves to the possibility of reading: nothing more and infinitely nothing less.

But then, what might *my reading of a text*,

<sup>3</sup>Here, the question of which of the Englishes might well be a pertinent one, but one that might well have to remain within the mists of time.

<sup>4</sup>Heinrich von Kleist, “On the marionette theatre,” trans. Thomas G. Neumiller, *The Drama Review: TDR* 16, no. 3: 22–26.

<sup>5</sup>Jean Genet, “The tightrope walker,” trans. Charlotte Mandell, in *The Criminal Child: selected essays*, (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2020): 99.

<sup>6</sup>Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: technology, schizophrenia, electric speech*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989): 380.

let alone *my translation of a text*, even begin to mean?

“My” — what does the word designate?

Not what belongs to me, but what I belong to, what contains my whole being, which is mine insofar as I belong to it.

(Søren Kierkegaard)<sup>7</sup>

Even as it is no longer fashionable to speak of relation, being in relation-with, perhaps even less of love, in that manner. But here, one should try not to forget that *to belong to* is not to *stake a claim on*, but to open oneself to the possibility of a possession. To the risk even of being possessed by the loved one. Of opening oneself to the possibility of seeing the world — as Alain Badiou, in a conversation on love with Nicolas Truong, says — of being in the world, “no longer from the perspective of the One but from the perspective of the Two”.<sup>8</sup>

One might even posit: to seeing the world in a manner in which one is always also taking-up, taking-on, *the slack*, of the other.

Which also means that: one is fundamentally changed by the other. For, opening oneself to the possibility of being-in-relation-with opens oneself to being contaminated by, being inseminated with, another.

After all, the *bounce* of the wire vibrates through you, echoes inside you, writes itself into you.

But in ways that might remain unknown, hidden-from, veiled-from, one; even after it has happened. For, as Badiou continues, “an encounter is not an experience, it is an event that remains quite opaque and only finds reality in its multiple resonances within the real

world”.<sup>9</sup>

That is, *traces* to be read.

And if this makes it sound as if a text is a mysterious entity, perhaps even to the point of being *otherworldly*, one should bear in mind Jacques Derrida’s beautiful response — to a question about the seemingly *sacred* nature of the text in Walter Benjamin’s conception of translation, of the task of the translator — when he, that is JD, reminds us that “a sacred text, if there is such a thing, is a text that does not await the question of whether or not it is necessary that there be such a thing”.<sup>10</sup>

For *things*, as Heraclitus continues to teach us, “things, they keep their secrets”.<sup>11</sup>

Where, even if one is attempting to, trying one’s best to, find the appropriate word, phrase, line — to express, catch, the mood, tone, feel, of — to translate with, to maintain a fidelity to the text, one might well also be appropriating, taking-over, making it one’s own (*sa propre*), propping oneself with it. So always also a question of *place*, of *placing*, of putting in a proper place (and who gets to decide what is proper?), of *putting it in its place*, of shelving, so perhaps putting aside, even if on a pedestal; of using it to put oneself on said-pedestal.

Perhaps though, *everything is in the saying of it*, on the accent given to something: keeping in mind that accents are often also what place us, give us away, that the manner in which we speak, that *the saying of it*, is what puts you in boxes, categorises you, as fluent, as a *native speaker*, of having a language as your *mother-tongue*, of not being from there, of a being stumbling in a second language, of being a permanent stranger regardless of how long one has been somewhere, even if one is born there, of

<sup>7</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *The Seducer’s Diary*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987): 146.

<sup>8</sup>Alain Badiou with Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush, (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2012): 29.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, 24.

<sup>10</sup>Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 147.

<sup>11</sup>Heraclitus, Fragment 10 in *Fragments*, trans. Brooks Haxton, with a foreword by James Hillman, (London: Penguin Classics, 2001).

being never good enough, let alone belonging.

A matter of place — and placement.

The irony that language fluency is linked to, tied with, our mothers whilst nationalities, names, family lineage, ethnicities are marked mainly through patrilineal lines should not be lost on us here. The question of what makes a language one's *mother tongue*, of what gives one the right to call a language one's *mother tongue* (does one ever have the right to make a claim on a language), is one that certainly should also be meditated upon: for the moment though, perhaps all that can be posited is that it is not just a matter of proficiency, aptitude, fluency.

A matter of place — and placement.

One might even say that one's *mother tongue* is precisely the language in which one stumbles, that one stutters in, that one utters when one is stuttering, stumbling, when one is beside oneself, out of control, angry, bereaved, bereft of reason, stricken, dreaming, dream-speaking, trying to find one's footing, has lost one's tongue ... in love.

A matter of place — and placement.

Which is what happens each time a work is placed, put, housed, is enframed, one might even say entombed — behind the strictures of conventions, of culture, requirements, genre, grammar itself; has to remain within boundaries, keep within the limits of polite society — even if this veiling claims to preserve, to maintain, to even help to flourish.

Much like when they are taken (*prendre*) by, taken into, one's grasp — placed under one's conception, one's comprehension.

Which certainly makes it doubtful whether

reading, writing, translating, is doing any good to the work — even as we know, think, certainly hope, this is what keeps works alive, maintains, sustains, them across times, cultures, geographies, fads, fashions, histories, official-versions of stories — or bringing harm onto them. And, if we are to maintain the fact that one is attempting to translate, write, read, *in fidelity* to the work, there is always also the possibility that this harm, this potential ruin, even destruction, might come from the work itself. That the work might be the one that decides its time were up. After all — despite the fantasies of dictators, censors, bureaucrats, and all of the ilk that want to curb, control, even dominate, works, perhaps even more so those who believe they are protecting people from works, the dogooders who want to guide works, make them useful to society, to serve the function of *bildung* — it would be incredibly vain to think that one has any power over a work, let alone have the ability to vanquish it.

However, where there is *doubt* — which as Salman Rushdie, through Gibreel himself, reminds us is precisely what separates us from angels<sup>12</sup> — therein lies the ability to question, the possibility of being free from the grip of God, to extricate oneself from the hand (*manus*) of daddy; that is, the possibility of *emancipation*.

Which suggests that to be free, to be emancipated, always also entails writing, creating, other manuscripts, reading other scripts which have thus-far-been hidden away in, been hiding within, the tales that have been transmitted to us, rescripting stories that we've been given, that have been taken as given.

<sup>12</sup>“Question: What is the opposite of faith? Not disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself is a kind of belief. Doubt. The human condition, but what of the angelic? Halfway between Allahgod and homosap, did they ever doubt? They did: challenging God's will one day they hid muttering beneath the Throne, daring to ask forbidden things: anti-questions. Is it right that. Could it not be argued. Freedom, the old antiques. He calmed them down, naturally, employing management skills à la god. Flattered them: you will be the instruments of my will on earth, the salvation damnation of man, all the usual etcetera. And hey presto, the end of protest, on with the haloes, back to work. Angels are easily pacified; turn them into instruments and they'll play your harpy tune. Human beings are tougher nuts, can doubt anything, even the evidence of their own eyes. Of behind-their-own-eyes. Of what, as they sink *heavy-lidded, transpires behind closed peepers* ... *angels, they don't have much in the way of a will. To will is to disagree; not to submit; to dissent* (Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, (Dover: The Consortium Inc., 1988): 92-93).



That is, telling other stories.

And, as my dear teacher, Chris Kraus, tries to never let us forget, “to tell a story is an act of love”.<sup>13</sup>

Bearing in mind that love always entails a risk — it is never safe; and the one in love opens themselves to its dangers; where there not only is the possibility of an invasion, an intrusion, even when one has been invited, is a guest in the ear of another, in the other’s ear, but that the one who tells, the lover, might well become lost in the other, might never be able to fully extricate themselves, might find that the other has disseminated themselves into, all over, them, has inseminated themselves in them, that one has hosted another so well that one has been effectively been kidnapped.

For, as Anne Dufourmantelle continues to teach us, “love, here I dare to risk the word, with apprehension of course, is an art of dependence. It, therefore, assumes that we risk it”.<sup>14</sup>

And, if knowledge entails a relation to and with the world, to something beyond ourselves, to something outside us, to another, truly knowing is always already also unknowable, might well lie in the unknown. So, not just that knowing that we know is unknowable, but that unknowability is not only the limit but always also the condition of knowledge itself. That, the foundation of knowledge is its unknown, is a non-foundation; where unknowability is not its antonym, but its own foregrounding of its limits each time it professes, testifies to its knowing, to knowledge. Which means that each profession of knowledge is always also knowledge testifying to itself, bringing itself forth, a telling of itself — attempting to narrate what it is.

So, always also a moment of fiction, *literature*. A writing of itself.

But how then does one read a text that is aware of itself as it is being written, that calls out to be read (*lit*) under erasure (*sous rature*), that might well be aware of its own writing, aware of itself being written, whilst being written, foregrounds itself as being written, is undoing itself, even erasing itself, as it is being read — and where reading is an opening of, an unravelling of, the webs that have been written, woven — where what is left are *cinders* of itself as a text that has been written.

Where, each time we read literature, what we might well be doing is *reading as unreading* — a reading that cannot be repeated (even as one can go back to the very same words), is singular. And where, since unrepeatable, can never be verified, not just by another but even your own self.

And where the translated text — what is inscribed of that reading — might well be *ashes of time*.

Though, as my dear friend Neil Murphy once told me, “reading literature with your head is always a mistake”.<sup>15</sup>

So, instead of attempting to rationalise literature — and by extension, reign it in, make it safe, tame it — open ourselves to a work.

And listen.

All whilst trying not to forget that the one who has inscribing these words, these worlds, is the same one who has been translating whilst transcribing, who is translating as (s)he is transcribing.

Transforming: moving between forms.

Not so much bringing something from another form into one’s own — and here it is not too difficult to hear echoes of Walter Benjamin

<sup>13</sup>Chris Kraus, *Aliens & Anorexia*, (Los Angeles: Smart Art Press, 2000): 121.

<sup>14</sup>Anne Dufourmantelle, *Éloge du risque*, (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 2014): 23. The translation from the French is mine. Which might well open the question, *what right have I to be making this translation of Anne’s writing; am I even qualified to do so?* But that would be, well, completely up to you: it is, as one might say, *your call*.

<sup>15</sup>This conversation took place sometime in June 2006, at a bar — so, there is a distinct possibility that we might have been attempting to speak about literature, think about reading, whilst blind-drunk.

again — making it fit a frame of one's making, but instead, welcoming it, hosting it, opening the new form to it; one might even say, cultivating a form in which something that occurred in another can sustain itself, be nourished, even grow.

Along with all of its attendant risks: of making improper incisions, ones which occur too soon, interventions which happen too early; of being overly impatient with the time needed for growth, some perceived lack of growth, being imprudent by attempting to direct too much, giving too much direction; of letting it grow for too long, being too patient, misrecognising a cancerous growth for what one considers flourishing, mistaking an infection for healthy growth.

For, even when done with the best of intentions, even if in fidelity to the text — perhaps even to the spirit of the text, as Benjamin sets as the task of the translator — every translation, movement, runs the risk of talking over, taking-over, where the one who translates, transfers, moves, overtakes the text itself, takes the place of the text (s)he is supposed to, even trying desperately to, care for, attend to, attune themselves to.

*Où le traducteur est toujours aussi un traître.*

Or, when the text takes over to the extent that the translation itself becomes gibberish, where the boundaries of the form into which it is taken are completely ruptured, broken, overflowed, to the extent that no one can make head or tail of what is allegedly in front of them. And in which the text itself fades away into complete nothingness, where it disappears.

Who (s)he betrays though: that might well be the question.

Perhaps though, what one is attempting to translate is the very name of the signature-text, text-signature itself: not so much the name on the text (by way of the name the text bears, the name of the one who signs, nor the title, even as both always remain to frame the text, and potentially accuse it of what it might not even

have done) but the *name of the text itself*.

Its proper name.

So not so much the 'I' of the one who has so-called written the text, who has signed-off on the text, nor that of the 'I' who reads-translates, is translating-reading, but the 'I' of the text itself: an 'I' which quite possibly does not exist prior to this reading-writing-translating, and maybe not even after.

And of which there might be nothing that can be said.

Which might well be *a secret name*: known only to the text itself (is there a gender to a text? or might genre be another of those strictures we attempt to place on a text, in order to act like we know what a text is) kept to itself until (s)he decides to reveal it to us ... to whisper it into our ears ...

— FIN —

## Echoes

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